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Lesbian Sappho and Sappho of Lesbos

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The present use of the word 'lesbian' is first attested in the English language in 1890.[1] The noun 'lesbianism', in relation to the homosexuality of women, is slightly older. It dates from 1870.[2] It is written with a capital letter, thus revealing the connection which was felt with the island of Lesbos, where the poet Sappho wrote her songs around 600 BC. Is the connection between the isle of Lesbos and the homosexuality of women justified? Are there reasons to believe that Sappho of Lesbos was a 'lesbian'?

This is the Great Sappho Question, defined in less kindly terms by a German scholar as 'der Versuch der Beurteilung des der Lyrikerin unterstellten, nach ihrer Heimatinsel benannten Excesses'.[3] This question was already debated in antiquity but scholars have still not been able to reach agreement. They probably never will, not only because the evidence is too scanty, but because there is something intrinsically wrong with the question as put. In this chapter I would like to collect the most important evidence which we possess for Sappho's sexual inclination, and see what can be deduced from it and also, more importantly, what cannot be deduced.

Our sources of information concerning Sappho's life can be divided into three categories. First, there are the remnants of her poems. Actually the word 'songs' is more appropriate, as all of Sappho's poems were performed to music. Secondly, there are the so-called *testimonia*, a collection of fiction, truths, and half-truths, about Sappho and her poetry, gathered from the works of various ancient writers. Finally, there is the historical context, our knowledge of Sappho's time, which may be used for purposes of comparison or as background information to her life and work. So

far as is possible, I will deal with these three sources of information separately, confining myself to those facts which could be of importance in finding out whether Sappho of Lesbos was lesbian as well.

1 THE FRAGMENTS[4]

A scholarly edition of Sappho's poems, or a not too fanciful translation, contains only one complete poem, approximately ten substantial fragments, a hundred short citations from the works of ancient writers, and around fifty pieces of papyrus texts that emerged from the sands of the Egyptian desert. This is why it is more accurate to speak of Sappho's fragments.

The contents of these fragments differ greatly. Besides songs about the beauty of young girls, we possess pieces of cultic hymns, wedding songs, satires, songs about members of Sappho's family, and even one epic fragment.[5] Our interest is drawn primarily to the songs about young girls, since they most of all have given rise to the supposition that Sappho was a lesbian. I shall discuss their contents later. First I would like to examine the other songs.

The cultic hymns suggest that Sappho was a respected member of her community. Otherwise it is inconceivable that she was granted the honour of writing songs for the gods. These were choral hymns sung in public. If Sappho was a lesbian, and was able to proclaim her predilection, it must have been acceptable to the island community. This may also be inferred from the small size and the open character of this community.

The wedding songs too were sung by choirs. Female friends of the bride performed them during the wedding feast. They show us that at least part of Sappho's poetical activity centred around heterosexual love. There are also other fragments that treat of the love between man and wife.[6]

The satirical poems are of special interest as they speak about young girls who ran away from Sappho or about women to whom they had turned. Whatever the relationship was between Sappho and her girls, she clearly experienced rivalry. The actual names of the women mean little to us, but in one fragment a girl is mentioned who preferred the friendship of a woman belonging to the house of Penthilus (fr. 71). We are acquainted with this family through the work of a contemporary of Sappho, the Lesbian poet

Alcaeus. His political arch-enemy had entered into an alliance with this family through marriage. According to some sources, Alcaeus in turn had befriended Sappho. It is possible that complex political alliances played an important role in the termination or establishment of relationships between Sappho and her girls, whatever they may have been.

Sappho criticized in her poems not only perfidious girls or troublesome rivals, but her own brother Charaxus and his girlfriend Doricha as well (cf. fr. 202). In yet another song she praises her younger brother Larichus who served wine in the town hall. As this was a privilege reserved for young aristocratic adolescents (fr. 203), it can safely be inferred that Sappho belonged to an important Lesbian family. The epic fragment, recounting the wedding of Hector and Andromache, I will not discuss here: perhaps it was performed at an actual wedding feast, or perhaps it was simply a mythical story which Sappho could recite on various occasions.[7]

Most controversy has been raised by Sappho's songs about young girls. They can roughly be divided into two groups. First there are the songs which concern those girls who had left Sappho, either against her wishes (see above) or with her consent (possibly in order to marry). In these songs she mentions the girls by name: Anactoria (fr. 16), Gongyla (fr. 22), Megara (fr. 68a), Mica (fr. 71), Arignota(?) (fr. 96), Atthis (fr. 131), Archeanassa (fr. 213). Therefore they must have been occasional verses, in the sense that they concern one particular girl and one particular occasion. The same cannot be said of the songs in which Sappho refers to a girl who is still near to her (fr. 1, fr. 23(?), fr. 31). No specific person is addressed and they could have been recited on various occasions, even by different poets.[8] This bipartition is rather hypothetical, though, as in most cases too little of the poems is preserved to say with certainty whether a name appeared in them or not. Thus we expect the name of a girl to have figured in the lost part of fragment 94, whereas we do not expect its occurrence in poem 23.

It is, however, certain that these poems concern young girls. Sometimes Sappho herself refers to them as such and the *testimonia* confirm this repeatedly. Therefore the supposition that Sappho was lesbian requires at the very least some qualifications. If Sappho's feelings towards these girls were erotic, she appears to have been

a kind of female pederast. But what exactly were these feelings? A French scholar recently declared that whatever has been adduced in defence of Sappho and her morals, the sensual character of most of her poetry is self-evident.[9] Against this can be set the words of a German classicist: 'In any case it has to be kept in mind that in the considerable amount of verses which we can study today, not the slightest indication can be found of any sexual "anomalies".'[10] Perhaps the only thing that is clear is that Sappho's poems are unclear in this respect.

Against the supposition that Sappho was lesbian it has repeatedly been argued that there is no sign of physical love in her poetry.[11] This statement has tempted others to scrutinize the fragments for the slightest possible allusion to homo-erotic practice. Fragment 94 is famous in this respect. In this fragment Sappho mentions her own name; so there can be no doubt about the identity of the narrator. She addresses a girl who had to leave her and she recalls all the pleasant things they did together: stringing flower-wreaths, putting on beautiful clothes and wearing lovely perfumes, and spending time in sanctuaries which the fragmentary words 'dance' and 'sound' probably relate to. In the middle of all this we read: 'and on soft beds . . . you would satisfy your longing . . .' (ll. 21–2). Here the text breaks off yet again and we are left to wonder what the girl was longing for. Even in antiquity one could experience longing (*pothos*) for other things besides sex. Perhaps the girl had been tired. An erotic interpretation of the line cannot be excluded, but as a whole the passage is a weak argument in favour of Sappho's involvement in lesbian love-affairs.

In another fragment a dildo is suddenly mentioned (*olisb* . . ., fr. 99, l. 5). I need not stress the fact that such an instrument could be of use to a heterosexual woman as well. Judith P. Hallett rightly remarked about this dildo: 'The poetic context fails to clarify Sappho's relationship to it and its to Sappho.'[12] Moreover, it is quite likely that this is a fragment in which Sappho tries to blacken one of her rivals. In that case the passage would rather be proof of Sappho's prudery; in contrast to this woman she would never make use of such an instrument.

The question is, however, whether it is safe to argue that Sappho did not participate in lesbian practices because she does not say so in her poetry. Reading the male poets who write about their love-affairs with adolescent boys we do not encounter a

detailed description of the act either, yet their physical involvement is hardly ever doubted. Sappho did not have to write pornography in order to be a lesbian poet.

The poetry of Sappho was already compared to that of the male pederasts in antiquity. In their love-poems we find parallels for most of the wording and imagery which Sappho uses.[13] This is one of the strongest arguments in favour of Sappho's sexual involvement with the girls she addresses. But against this it can be said that in her wedding songs Sappho permits choirs to sing about a bride in no less erotic terms than she uses in her alleged homo-erotic lyrics. A good example is fragment 112. Here a maiden choir sings to the bride: 'Your form is gracious and your eyes . . . honey-sweet; love streams over your desire-arousing face. Aphrodite has indeed greatly honoured you.' Most fragments of Sappho are far more innocent in tone.

The looks of a girl were considered to be extremely important in antiquity. Would it not be possible then that Sappho in her poems, like the choirs in the wedding songs, wishes only to emphasize the attractiveness of these young girls, which was meant to be appreciated in the first place by the men in her audience? In her poems she regularly compares the girls with famous heterosexual women, like Helen of Troy (fr. 16 and fr. 23), and according to an ancient report those who were most attracted by her poetry were young men in love (*test.* 58). The parallel in her wedding songs is of even more significance when one realizes that some of these songs may have been sung by maiden choirs as well (n. 8).

One could object that Sappho occasionally states that she is herself attracted by the beauty of her girls. In fragment 1 she says that she suffers from a 'maddened heart' (l. 18, cf. fr. 36 and fr. 8) and in fragment 16 she declares that Anactoria 'is loved' (l. 4, cf. fr. 49). The one does not have to exclude the other, however. An archaic Greek did not think in terms of exclusive homosexual and exclusive heterosexual love. By declaring that she herself was enchanted by the beauty of her girls, she did not diminish their prospects of marriage. Quite the contrary. What is expressed in all these poems is the general attractiveness of the girls. It is not chance that both in the wedding song quoted above, and in fragment 1, in which Sappho herself speaks, Aphrodite is invoked. But this does not answer the question whether Sappho

engaged in sexual affairs with the girls. And we may ask ourselves yet another question: how far are the sentiments which Sappho expresses in her poetry to be considered personal?

The late French scholar George Devereux interpreted fragment 31 as a poetical reflection of an anxiety attack that Sappho had suffered as a result of her repressed homosexuality.[14] In this fragment Sappho enumerates various so-called *pathemata*, afflictions of body and soul. The narrator suffers from these every time she sees an unspecified girl laughing and speaking to a man. Her heart misses a beat, her ears ring. She cannot speak and sweat pours down her face. She mentions ten of these *pathemata* in all. The situation looks grave, but a psychological interpretation of these conditions is not permissible as that is something alien to the Greek culture Sappho lived and wrote in. In fragment 47 she tells us that Eros moved her mind, like the wind which falls upon the oak trees in the mountains. What we experience as a personal feeling is here ascribed to the power of a god which is regarded as something akin to a force in nature.[15]

The poetry of Sappho is, like all archaic poetry, conventional in character. Eight of the *pathemata* enumerated in the fragment are already mentioned by Homer, and after Sappho we regularly encounter them in Greek literature as well. The Latin poet Catullus could translate the whole fragment to express his feelings for a woman.[16] Even if we are willing to assume that the narrator in the poem is Sappho herself and that she thought of one particular girl when she wrote the song, it is impossible to gather from her poem her personal feelings. This is emphatically true of all her poetry. Even if some of her songs appear homo-erotic in content, one cannot infer that Sappho was a lesbian at heart. Neither, however, may one conclude the contrary.

Sappho's own verse, which can be rightly termed the most reliable biographical source, yields depressingly little. It is a fact that she did not write exclusively about lesbian love, and also that she must have been a respected member of her community. Possibly she engaged in sexual relations with the girls she wrote about, like the male poets who wrote about their boys. If so, we would like to find some confirmation in other sources. Perhaps the *testimonia* can be of assistance.

2 THE TESTIMONIA

Much must have been written about Sappho in antiquity, ranging from brief allusions to voluminous works, but only a fraction came down to us. The most elaborate source we possess is a poem by the Latin poet Ovid.[17] It takes the form of a letter supposedly written by Sappho herself. In this letter various details are mentioned which we know of from other sources as well. Confining myself to facts related to Sappho's sexual disposition, I will try to examine their historical value.

The 'letter of Sappho' is addressed to Phaon, a man (!) she is said to be hopelessly in love with.[18] This love induces her to commit suicide by jumping from the Leucadian rock into the sea.[19] She also speaks about a daughter (!),[20] but there is mention of her preference for little girls as well:

> Neither the girls of Pyrrha or Methymna [villages on Lesbos] delight me, nor the rest of the throng of Lesbian women. Naught to me is Anactoria, naught the fair Cydro; Atthis is not pleasing, as before, to my eyes, nor *a hundred others whom I have loved, not without reproach*. Shameless man, what once belonged to many girls is yours alone now. (Italics added)[21]

Here we have the most likely source of Sappho's reputation as a lesbian in the nineteenth century. At the beginning of that century this poem of Ovid was better known than any other writing about Sappho, including her own poetry. Faith in the document was increased by the fact that for a long time it was believed to be based on an original letter of Sappho, which Ovid merely translated. Sceptics could find confirmation in the Suda, a Byzantine compilation of a variety of facts worth knowing from antiquity. In it there is mention of three 'companions or girlfriends' of Sappho, 'Atthis, Telesippa, and Megara', through whom she earned a bad reputation for 'disgraceful friendship' (*test.* 2). At the beginning of the twentieth century a papyrus text was found which refers to rumours suggesting that Sappho had been a 'woman-lover' (*test.* 1).

The German classicist Welcker was the first to conduct a critical examination of the *testimonia*. In 1816 he published a book under the instructive title: 'Sappho freed from a modern prejudice'. In this study he exposed as fables practically all the ancient accounts of Sappho's life, in particular those concerning her alleged

lesbianism. He blamed Athenian comedy for most of the fabrications. It would have presented its customary caricature, which in Sappho's case subsequent authors, including Ovid, took to be true.[22]

The weakness in Welcker's argument is that, so far as we know, Sappho was never portrayed as a lesbian on the Athenian stage, but, quite to the contrary, as an extreme heterosexual. She supposedly enjoyed various male lovers at one and the same time, and in all probability her love of Phaon was made fun of. It appears that the name which the Suda gives to a husband of Sappho is derived from a Greek comedy as well: a free translation of it would be 'Prick from the city of Man'.[23] But Welcker has to be given credit for raising doubts about the historical value of the ancient reports. One should not believe everything one reads, even when written two thousand years ago.

It can be assumed that the Greeks and Romans in subsequent ages knew little more than we do about events that had taken place on Lesbos in the sixth century BC. But they had one advantage over us: they must still have been able to read the works of Sappho in fairly complete form. Therefore, whenever they mention a fact which may stem from Sappho's own writing, it should be treated seriously.

A good example is the historicity of Sappho's daughter. Ovid does not mention her name but other sources do: Cleïs (*test.* 1 and *test.* 2). We possess two fragments by Sappho in which this name occurs (fr. 98b and fr. 132). These fragments by themselves do not reveal that we are dealing with a daughter of Sappho, but nothing contradicts this possibility and a single word in fragment 132 may even corroborate it.[24] We know that Sappho wrote songs about her brothers, so a poem about a daughter would not be inconceivable. In such a case the *testimonia* may tip the scales. In all probability Sappho did have a daughter named Cleïs. Given the social context, one may assume that she was also married therefore, and Greek comedy jumped to this conclusion, as we have seen. Yet it is strange that we do not possess any reliable name for Sappho's husband. Normally the names of mothers and wives are lacking in the ancient sources, not those of husbands.[25] Probably Sappho was married, but we cannot know for sure.

Very different is the case of Sappho's alleged leap from the Leucadian rock. It goes without saying that she could not have

recorded it in her poetry. It is also unlikely that there was a contemporary report. In all probability the account is not historical. But we cannot leave it at this. We must ask ourself how such a story could arise. A leap from the Leucadian rock is also mentioned by another Greek poet (Anacreon fr. 13, Page). Here it is presented as a proverbial remedy against the pain of love. Love-pains figure prominently in the poems of Sappho, and it could be that she had used the same image in a lost poem. That would offer a plausible explanation for the origin of the story. Many such figurative statements by early poets were taken literally by scholars in late antiquity.[26]

The story of Sappho's love for Phaon is probably also based on an erroneous reading of Sappho's poetry. Phaon was a mythological figure, who belonged among the loved ones of Aphrodite, just like Adonis with whom he should perhaps be identified. We know that Sappho wrote songs about the love of Aphrodite for Phaon and Adonis (fr. 211). A fragment is preserved of one of those songs for Adonis in which the goddess is made to speak (fr. 140a). It may be that Sappho had put into the mouth of the goddess a profession of love for Phaon, which was later interpreted as being her own.[27]

When the same critical approach is applied to the reports about Sappho's homosexuality as to the stories of her suicide and her love for Phaon, there remains little to support their claim to be historical. After all, it is unlikely that Sappho proclaimed in any of her poems that she was a 'woman-lover'. But there is one difference. These reports about her homosexuality cannot be traced to a misreading of a proverbial statement or a confusion of identities. They are interpretations of genuine statements by Sappho about girls like Atthis and Anactoria. And as we ourselves are puzzled about their intention, should we not allow these ancient interpretations to guide our own?

Even when ancient reports about Sappho's life prove to be unhistorical, they can be of value, because they reflect how Sappho was viewed in antiquity. This view must somehow be based on responses to Sappho's poetry, as this was the only available source of information about her life in later antiquity. Now, with regard to Sappho's sexual predilections the opinions seem to have changed remarkably over the ages. In Athenian comedy (around the fourth century BC), as we have seen, she was portrayed as a

staunch heterosexual. Rumours about her 'disgraceful friendships' with women emerge only in Roman times, and even then stories were still circulating about her involvement with men. Thus the Roman philosopher Seneca mentions a contemporary treatise addressing the question whether or not Sappho had been a prostitute (*test.* 22).

The meaning of the word 'lesbian' (*lesbis*, *lesbia*) underwent a similar change. The word was used in the first place for a female inhabitant of the isle of Lesbos, but from classical times onwards erotic connotations became attached to it. What influence Sappho's poetry played in this is hard to assess, but that it did have influence is not unlikely. In antiquity Sappho was already by far the most famous female inhabitant of the island. Her poetry was very popular and Lesbos minted coins bearing an image of the poet for several centuries (*test.* 11 + n).

The classical comedy writer Aristophanes (446–385 BC) used a verb *lesbiazein*, 'to do like the Lesbian women', for women who practised fellatio, and this meaning of the verb is attested until late antiquity.[28] The first overt association of Lesbos with female homosexuality is found in Roman times. The Greek writer Lucian (*c.* AD 120–80) states: '*They say* there are women in Lesbos with faces like men, and unwilling to consort with men, but only with women, as though they themselves were men' (italics added).[29] In the Byzantine period we also encounter the word 'lesbia' itself with reference to a female homosexual.[30] It can hardly be accidental that Sappho's sexual reputation runs parallel with that of the women of Lesbos in general. In my opinion the development of the meaning of the word 'lesbian' in antiquity can serve as evidence for responses to Sappho's poetry.

How can this development be explained and what does it finally tell us about our poet? The matter is complex and we can only speculate. As I said before, in archaic and classical times there was no strict boundary between hetero- and homosexual love.[31] Both belonged to the sphere of influence of Eros and Aphrodite, who together were opposed to Hera, the goddess of the orderly, less passionate married life. A womanizer like Alcibiades could just as well be accused of lacking restraint in his pursuit of homo-erotic affairs. Is Sappho's case similar? Could it be that her frivolous songs praising the beauty of young girls gave rise to the assumption that she would also have been more than willing to sleep

with numerous men, preferably in a shameless manner?

After the classical period a change in the conception of sexuality occurs. The heterosexual love-novel presented itself with its 'happy ending' in marriage, while the practice of pederasty no longer was permissible. Aphrodite and Eros were assigned their own spheres of influence: Aphrodite was said to cover the area of heterosexual love (from now on to be sought in marriage), Eros the area of homosexual love (primarily an aberration of the archaic poets).[32] A dichotomy thus arises between homo- and heterosexuality, similar to that in modern society. As long as the distinction was not regarded as absolute, one could see in Sappho a generally erotic woman: Aphrodite and Eros were central to her poetry, and so they must have been to her life. From the moment that a choice had to be made between the two, Sappho belonged, according to some of her readers at least, to the category of homosexual women: her poetry, after all, was all about girls.

It is possible to derive both views of Sappho from the erotic interpretation of her poetry. This fact is in itself not without significance: it supports those who believe that there is more at stake in her songs about young girls than mere praise of their beauty. But each view has its own particular limitations. Sappho lived in the archaic Greek age, not in the Roman, Byzantine, or modern era. This means that any proclamation that Sappho was a homosexual, or the opposite, is necessarily anachronistic. And what are we to make of the classical Greek opinion that she was a 'generally erotic' woman? Are we also to infer from her poetry that she devoted not only her poetic talents to the works of Aphrodite, but her personal life as well? There is in any case not the slightest scrap of evidence in her poetry that Sappho slept with numerous men, and Welcker was certainly right in asserting that Athenian comedy could exaggerate grossly.

3 THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Our investigation of the *testimonia* has made one thing particularly clear: it is of the utmost importance to discover more about the social and cultural context in which the work of Sappho has to be seen. Unfortunately our information about the archaic Greek era is as defective as the transmission of Sappho's poetry and *testimonia*. And there is the additional problem that it is impossible

to decide with certainty what is relevant to Sappho's poetry and what is not. I shall concentrate on two subjects, which have received most attention in modern research on Sappho: first the educational system which brought young girls together in groups, and secondly the existence of women in other parts of Greece who had sexual relationships with girls.

From the poems of Sappho it becomes clear that she had gathered several girls around her and some of the *testimonia* speak about education.[33] These facts tempted a prominent German classicist to declare that Sappho had been at the head of a 'boarding-school' for young women. He has been vehemently attacked because of the anachronism of this view. Nevertheless, most scholars today have accepted the idea that Sappho's relationship to her girls encompassed that of teacher to pupil.[34]

Thanks to a fairly recent study we know more about the kind of groups in which young girls were organized in archaic Greece.[35] They joined maiden choirs, which formed part of their education. Music was considered pedagogically important in early Greece. By singing together the girls learned discipline as well as a certain sense of beauty. Singing was usually accompanied by dancing. Through these dances the girls could show that they knew how to move gracefully. Spinning and weaving, two even more important skills for women, were taught at home. They did not belong to the activities practised by Sappho and her maidens.[36]

The poems of Sappho do not reveal the exact kind of organization her so-called 'circle' comprised. Music and dance figure prominently in the fragments, however, and at one time she speaks about the house 'of those who serve the Muses' (fr. 150). The same expression is encountered in an inscription from the second century BC about a theatre group.[37] There is nothing surprising about a poet leading a choir of girls. It could have performed the religious hymns, the wedding songs, and possibly other songs which Sappho wrote. It could also accompany performances by Sappho herself with dances.[38] Sappho's teaching need not have been restricted to music and dance, however. An impression of all the activities Sappho performed with her girls is to be found in fragment 94, summarized above (p. 18). Thus there are good reasons for the presence of young girls in Sappho's poetry, other than sexual. But the one does not have to exclude the other,

and besides singing and dancing and putting on beautiful clothes, fragment 94 referred to a young girl's unspecified longings.

There are very few sources about lesbian love in antiquity and they are mostly of dubious quality.[39] It is clear, however, that lesbian love was known, but that it was, at least in late antiquity, not accepted. Lucian, whom we quoted above, calls the love between two women 'unnatural', and the Roman poet Martialis even speaks of a crime (*facinus*, I.90.6). This judgement is shared by Ovid and the other commentators on the 'disgraceful friendships' of Sappho.

It certainly comes as a surprise that a contemporary of Martialis, the Greek author Plutarch, asserts that in ancient Sparta 'distinguished ladies' had sexual relationships with young girls (*Lyc.* 18.4). The Spartans introduced the custom, he says, to match the pederastic relationships between adult men and young boys. An obscure statement by an obscure philosopher from the fourth century BC seems to confirm this. He declares that it was customary for young Spartan girls before their marriage to have sexual relationships like the boys.[40] In subsequent ages there were various fables told about archaic Sparta, and we should seriously doubt the reliability of these statements, were they not corroborated by evidence from the archaic age itself.

Thus we know that the poet Alcman, who wrote songs for Spartan maiden choirs in the seventh century BC, used the word *aïtis* for a young girl engaged in a sexual relationship (fr. 183 Calame). The male equivalent of this word, *aïtas*, was the official term for the young boy in a pederastic relationship. We also possess a vase from the Greek island of Thera, dated around 600 BC, which portrays two women, the one making an inviting gesture to the other, who is carrying a wreath in her hand.[41] We possess similar representations of men and young boys. It seems therefore that during the archaic Greek period there existed in some parts of Greece relationships between older women and girls, similar to male pederastic relationships.

Of the maiden songs of Alcman two fairly long fragments have been preserved. Their contents have led some scholars to believe that homo-erotic relationships also existed between the young girls themselves.[42] Thus in fragment 26 (Calame) a maiden choir displays the admiration which its members feel towards one of them, presumably their leader, the *choragos*, in the following way:

'with longing that loosens the limbs and she casts glances that are more melting than sleep and death; and not in vain is she sweet' (ll. 61–3). The English scholar Bowra wrote about the girl: 'We are left with the impression that the whole company is in love with her and no doubt this is what Alcman intended his audience to feel.' But he added: 'The aim of the song is the celebration of a girl's beauty and charm which everyone is intended to feel.'[43] There is a marked difference, however, between 'love' and 'the celebration of a girl's beauty', and between 'the whole company' and 'everyone'. (The celebrated girl is running among a large crowd – ll. 73–4.) There is a strong resemblance between the description of this girl and that of the bride in fragment 112 of Sappho, which I quoted above. Therefore I see no reason why the choir should be saying anything more than that their leader should be regarded as a very beautiful girl.

In my opinion the same holds true for the girls Hagesichora and Agido in fragment 3 (Calame). In this poem there is, however, another interesting passage. At a certain moment the maiden choir makes the following general statement: 'You [a woman] won't go to the house of Ainesimbrota and say "let Astaphis be mine", nor "let Philulla pay attention to me and Damareta and lovely Wianthemis", but [you will say] "Hagesichora distresses me"' (ll. 73–7). We do not know who Ainesimbrota was, but it is clear that she had some influence over the girls. It has been suggested that she was a sorcerer who could brew love-potions.[44] Otherwise she might have been a woman who allocated the girls among the women of Sparta. It is a fact that in Sparta the practice of pederasty was more tightly organized than anywhere else in Greece. Thus the passage could point to possible relationships between the girls and women in the audience. There is, however, no reason to suppose that relationships also existed among the girls themselves. The other sources also refer only to relationships between adult women and girls.

It has been suggested that these kind of relationships existed on Lesbos as well, and that Sappho, and possibly her 'rivals', were such adult women.[45] It is a fact that in the days of Sappho pederasty was practised on the island. This can be inferred from the poems of Alcaeus.[46] But this is all we can say with certainty. Some resemblances between Sappho and the Spartan women can be pointed to. In both cases we are dealing with highborn women.

From our sources concerning male pederastic relationships it appears that these were restricted to the aristocracy. Also the age of the Spartan girls and of those in Sappho's circle appear to be similar. The advantage of the comparison is that it can do full justice to the erotic interpretation of Sappho's poetry in antiquity and to the parallels which were drawn between her poetry and that of the male pederasts. It also provides sexual relationships between Sappho and her girls with the necessary social legitimacy.

There remain some problems, however. Sappho had a group of young girls around her, and it is unlikely that she had a sexual relationship with all of them. Both the women in Sparta and the male pederasts had relationships with only one youth. But there need not have been a connection between Sappho's relationships and her 'circle'. In Sparta there was a distinction between the poet who instructed the girls (e.g. Alcman), and their female lovers. Whatever the reliability of the Suda as a source may be, it does differentiate between 'girlfriends' of Sappho and her 'pupils' (*test.* 2). If her girlfriends did belong to the circle, probably each of them was in succession the most important girl of the group, or, according to the terminology of a Greek maiden choir, the *choragos*. One may also think of groups like those at Crete which centred around one aristocratic boy and his lover.[47]

Another problem is that some *testimonia* maintain that it was not only girls from Lesbos, but also girls from other parts of Greece, who joined Sappho's group.[48] It is extraordinary that this assertion has never been doubted. It does not comply with the types of organization we know of in archaic Greece, and it compels one to believe that Sappho was indeed heading a kind of boarding-school. The fame of Sappho throughout antiquity would itself be sufficient reason for the fabrication of the story. Ultimately all archaic female poets were said to have been pupils of Sappho, and it is only natural that other cities desired to establish some connection with the tenth Muse, as Sappho sometimes was called. But it is also possible that the assertion stems from an erroneous reading of her poetry. The regions to which some of the girls, according to the poems, went *after* their stay in Sappho's circle, may have been held to be their places of origin. In most cases the girls were married there, and the mobility of brides, still fairly great among the aristocracy of archaic Greece, may not have been taken into account by the Hellenistic scholars. But whether one believes the

assertion or not, it does not affect the possibility that Sappho had sexual relationships with some of her girls, similar to those between adult men and boys, or between women and girls in other parts of Greece.

As regards these relationships one has to be cautious, however, about the application of modern notions, like 'lesbian' or 'homosexual', associated as these are with such concepts as 'natural inclination' or 'exclusiveness'. We are dealing with an institutionalized type of sexuality, in which the preferences of those involved may have been of little consequence. We have remarked that in the establishment of relationships between Sappho and her girls alliances between prominent families probably played a larger part than her own heart. Our sources about the pederastic relationships of the men indicate that they were primarily a mark of honour, and the whole practice may ultimately go back to an initiation ritual.[49]

There can be no question of exclusiveness either. Sappho was probably married, and it is unlikely that this was not the case with the 'distinguished ladies' in Sparta. The girls were also expected to marry. Hagnon states explicitly that the relationships lasted till their marriage, and it is commonly agreed that Sappho wrote her marriage songs for girls who shortly before had left her circle.

CONCLUSION

We may conclude that in the case of Sappho we are dealing at the most with short relationships between an adult woman and a young, marriageable girl. To call these relationships 'lesbian' is anachronistic. Whether the word applies to Sappho herself, her inner life, is impossible to assess. Actually it constitutes a nonsensical question. Even if by modern standards Sappho were to be considered lesbian, her experience must have been very different, living as she did in a different age with different notions and different types of sexuality.

NOTES

I have greatly profited from comments made by Dr J. N. Bremmer, Dr Th. C. W. Oudemans, Dr R. C. T. Parker, and I. Sluiter. Dr Parker, and my brother-in-law, Desmond McAleer, also helped to revise my

English. The Dutch version of this article was dedicated to my girlfriend, Cécile Cuppens, now my wife.

1 J. P. Hallett, 'Sappho and her social context', *Signs*, 1979, 3: 451–2. She also discusses another term derived from Sappho's reputation as a homosexual, the words 'sapphism', 'sapphist', and 'sapphic'.

2 *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. II, Oxford, 1976, 645. The English were fairly late in adopting the term, compared to the continent of Europe. In French it is already attested in 1842: W. von Wartenburg, *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Vol. V, 1950, 261, s.v. Lesbos; in Dutch the word 'sapfisch' (Sapphisch) dates at least from 1847: *Algemeen noodwendig woordenboek*, Amsterdam, 1847, cited by M. Everhard, 'De liefde van Lesbos in Nederland', *Tijdschrift voor vrouwenstudies*, 1984, 5: 344.

3 'The attempt to evaluate the excess which, named after her place of origin, the poet is said to have committed' (my translation): H. Saake, *Sapphostudien: Forschungsgeschichtliche, biografische und literarästhetische Untersuchungen*, Munich, 1972, 14.

4 The numbers of fragments and *testimonia* refer to the latest edition of Sappho's poems, that of D. A. Campbell, *Greek Lyric*, Vol. 1, in the Loeb Classical Library, 1983. Campbell has provided all fragments and *testimonia* with a useful translation. In numbering the fragments he has followed fairly closely the editions of E. Lobel and D. L. Page, *Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta*, Oxford, 1955, and E.-M. Voigt, *Sappho et Alcaeus: Fragmenta*, Amsterdam, 1971.

5 With a reasonable degree of certainty we can identify as *cultic hymns* fragments 2 (?), 140, cf. fr. 211; as *wedding songs*, fragments 27, 30, 103–17b, 161, cf. fr. 194, *testimonium* 58; as *satires*, 133 (?), 144, 178 (?), 213, cf. *test.* 20; as songs about *her brother Charaxus*, fragments 3 (?), 5, 7 (?), 15, 209 (?), 213A (b–e), cf. fr. 202, *test.* 1, 9, 14–16; and about *her brother Larichus*, fragment 203, cf. *test.* 1, 2, 14. Fragment 44 is commonly regarded as *epic* in character.

6 Fragments 102 (?), 121, 129b, 137, 138. A detailed discussion of the wedding songs can be found in D. L. Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus: an introduction to the study of ancient Lesbian poetry*, Oxford, (1955), 119–26.

7 The view, widely held at the beginning of this century, that fr. 44 was performed during an actual wedding feast, has recently been defended again by W. Rösler, 'Ein Gedicht und sein Publikum: Ueberlegungen zu Sappho fr. 44', *Hermes*, 1975, 103: 275–85. Most modern interpreters, though, prefer to regard the poem as an unspecified mythological story: A. Lesky, *Geschichte der Griechische Literatur*, Berne, 1971[3], 171; Saake, *Sapphostudien*, 78; G. M. Kirkwood, *Early Greek Monody: the history of a poetic type*, Ithaca, NY/London, 1974, 146. See also: A. M. van Erp Taalman Kip, 'Enige interpretatieproblemen in Sappho', *Lampas*, 1980, 13: 349–51; A. Pippin-Burnett, *Three Archaic Poets: Archilochus, Alcaeus, Sappho*, London, 1983, 219–20.

8 M. L. West, 'Burning Sappho', *Maia*, 1970, 22: 307–30. It is too readily assumed that Sappho intended her songs to be performed solely by herself. She mentions her name in only four fragments (frs 1, 65, 94, 133), which makes it possible that other songs were meant to be sung by other poets as well. Moreover, it appears from the fragments that her girls also dedicated songs to each other (fr. 22 and fr. 96). Were these songs composed by themselves, or did Sappho write them, as she wrote the wedding songs? It could be that an occasional poem like fragment 96 was actually meant to be sung by one, or a group, of her girls (note the plural in line 21, although this is not conclusive). This does not make the interpretation of Sappho's poetry any easier.

9 F. Buffière, *Eros adolescent: La pédérastie dans la Grèce antique*, Paris, 1980, 246.

10 My translation: A. Lesky, *Vom Eros der Hellenen*, Göttingen, 1976, 53.

11 Still recently: Hallett, 453.

12 Ibid. About the fragment see also: Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus*, 144–5; West, 'Burning Sappho', 324; G. Giangrande, 'Sappho and the "olisbos"', *Emerita*, 1980, 48, 449–50; A. Guarino, '"Professorenerotismus"', *Labeo*, 1981, 27: 439–40; G. Giangrande, 'A che serviva l' "olisbos" de Saffo?', *Labeo*, 1983, 29: 154–5.

13 G. Lanata, 'Sul linguaggio amoroso di Saffo', *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica*, 1966, 2: 63–79; Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus*, 10. Sappho is often mentioned in the same breath with Anacreon, a known representative of pederastic poetry: Plato, *Phaedrus*, 235c, *test.* 39, 42, 47, 51, 52, 54; fr. 156. E. S. Stigers, however, maintains that there is a marked difference between Sappho's love-poetry and that of the male poets, in H. P. Foley (ed.), *Reflections of Women in Antiquity*, New York, 1981, 45–61. On Sappho's love-poetry see also: Ch. P. Segal, 'Eros and incantation: Sappho and oral poetry', *Arethusa*, 1974, 7: 139–60.

14 G. Devereux, 'The nature of Sappho's seizure in fr. 31 LP as evidence of her inversion', *Classical Quarterly*, 1970, 20: 17–31.

15 For the radical difference between our modern and the archaic Greek culture, see now Th. C. W. Oudemans and A. P. M. H. Lardinois, *Tragic Ambiguity: Anthropology, Philosophy and Sophocles' Antigone*, Leiden, 1987, esp. chs 2–4.

16 Catullus LI. For Homeric and other parallels: A. Turyn, *Studia Sapphica I*, *Eos* Suppl. 6, Lwow, 1929, 29, 41–57; Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus*, 29. O. Tsagarakis has drawn some interesting parallels with modern Greek folk songs: 'Some neglected aspects of love in Sappho's fr. 31', *Rheinisches Museum*, 1979, 122: 97–118; more recently: 'Broken hearts and the social circumstances in Sappho's poetry', *Rheinisches Museum*, 1986, 129: 1–17. They confirm the conventional character of Sappho's verses. However, his interpretation of the song as heterosexual in content has to be rejected, cf. J. M. Bremer, 'A reaction to Tsagarakis' discussion of Sappho fr. 31', *Rheinisches Museum*, 1982, 125: 113–16.

17 *Heroides* 15. Campbell includes several passages from the poem in his collection of *testimonia*: ll. 61–2 (*test.* 13), ll. 63–70 and 117–20 (*test.* 16), ll. 15–20 and 201 f. (*test.* 19), ll. 29–30 (*test.* 44).
18 *Her.* 15, esp. ll. 9–12, cf. *test.* 3, 23; fr. 211a, 211c.
19 *Her.* 15, ll. 175 ff., 220; cf. *test.* 3, 23 + n.
20 *Her.* 15, ll. 70, 120; cf. *test.* 1, 2, fr. 150, 213A(g)?.
21 *Her.* 15, ll. 15–20 (*test.* 19); cf. ll. 201–2; Ovid, *Tristia* 2.365 (*test.* 49). In view of the verses 201–2 the stated reading, 'not without reproach' (*non sine crimine*) is to be preferred to the reading 'here without reproach' (*hic sine crimine*): H. Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, Princeton, NJ, 1974, 292–3; recently W. M. Calder III, 'Welcker's Sapphobild and its reception in Wilamowitz', in W. M. Calder III *et al.* (eds), *Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker: Werk und Wirkung*, *Hermes* Einzelschriften, Wiesbaden, 1986, 49, (131–56): 143.
22 Ibid., 131–56.
23 W. Aly, 'Sappho', in Pauly Wissowa, *Realencylopädie des klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Vol. 2 A 1, 1920, 2361; Campbell, *Greek Lyric*, 5. On Sappho in Athenian comedy: *test.* 8, 25, 26 + n.
24 *agapata* (beloved): J. P. Hallett, 'Beloved Cleïs', *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica*, 1982, NS 10, 21–31; compare, however, 'beloved soul' (*psucha agapatasu* . . ., fr. 62).
25 J. N. Bremmer, 'Plutarch and the naming of Greek women', *American Journal of Philology*, 1981, 102: 425 f.
26 C. M. Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry*, Oxford, 1976, 177, 213. For a different explanation of the image: G. Nagy, 'Phaethon, Sappho's Phaon, and the white rock of Leukas', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 1973, 77: 137–77.
27 Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry*, 212–14.
28 H. D. Jocelyn, 'A Greek indecency and its students: ''laikazein'' ', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 1980, NS 26, 18 + n. 66, 31–4; A. M. Komornicka, 'A la suite de la lecture ''La ragazza di Lesbo'' ', *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica*, 1976, 21: 37–41.
29 Lucian, *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, 5.2.
30 A. C. Cassio, 'Post-classical ''Lesbia'' ', *Classical Quarterly*, 1983, 33: 296–7.
31 Cf. K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, London/New York, 1978, 1.
32 Buffière, *Eros adolescent*, 245. On sexuality in ancient Greece: H. Licht, *Sittengeschichte der Griechen I: Das Liebesleben der Griechen*, Dresden/Zürich, 1926 (English translation: *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece*, London 1962[2]); R. Flacelière, *L'amour en Grèce*, Paris, 1960 (English translation: *Love in Ancient Greece*, London, 1962); Lesky, *Vom Eros der Hellenen*; C. Calame (ed.), *L'amore in Grecia*, Rome, 1983; M. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, II: *L'usage des plaisirs*, Paris, 1984, and III: *Le souci de soi*, Paris, 1984 (English translation: *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure*, New York, 1985, Vol 3: *The Care of the Self*, New York, 1985).
33 *Test.* 2, 20, 21, 49, fr. 214B1.
34 U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Die griechische Literatur des Altertums,*

etc., Leipzig/Berlin, 1912, cited by Calder, *Welcker*, 140 + n. For the educative role of Sappho, see among others: C. Calame, *Les choeurs de jeunes filles en Grèce archaïque*, I, Rome, 1977, 367–72, 390–1, 400–4; Pippin-Burnett, *Three Archaic Poets*, 209–28.

35 C. Calame, *Les choeurs de jeunes filles en Grèce archaïque*, Rome, 1977.

36 Contra R. Merkelbach, 'Sappho und ihre Kreis', *Philologus*, 1959, 101: 4; in fr. 102 a daughter speaks to her mother(!); inc. fr. 17 probably refers to the goddess Athena: Campbell, *Greek Lyric*, ad loc.

37 Calame, *Les choeurs de jeunes filles*, 367.

38 Ibid., 127.

39 Some philosophers (Plato *Symposium* 191e, *Laws* I.636c; Pseudo-Lucian *Affairs of the Heart* 28; Synesius *De Providentia* 13, 17); some church-fathers (St Paul *Letter to the Romans* 1.26; Clemens of Alexandria *Paedagogus* III.3.21.3; Tertullian *De Pallio* 4.9, *De Resurrectione* 16); two myth-makers (Ovid *Metamorphoses* 9.724–35; Phaedrus 4.15); other poets (Horace *Epodes* 5.41; Asclepiades (?) *Anthologia Graeca* 5. 207; Martial 1.90, 7.58, 67, 70); some astrologers (Manetho 1.31, 3.330, 4.358, 5.216; Ptolemy *Tetrabiblos* 3.14; Vettius Valens 111.7); an interpreter of dreams (Artemidorus 1.80); a doctor (Soranus *apud* Caelius Aurelianus *De morbis chronicis* 4.9); a pseudo-orator (*apud* Seneca Rhetor *Controversiae* 1.2.23), and two comic writers (Petronius *Satyricon* 67; Lucian *Dialogues of the Courtesans* 5). See also W. Kroll, 'Lesbische Liebe', in Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopädie des klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Vol. 13, 1924, 2100–2; Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 171–84; Licht, *Sittengeschichte der Griechen I*, ch. 11.

40 Athenaeus XIII, 602 d/e: Calame, *Les choeurs de jeunes filles*, 434; J. N. Bremmer, 'An enigmatic Indo-European rite: paederasty', *Arethusa*, 1980, 13: 279–98; contra: G. Devereux, 'Greek pseudo-homosexuality and the "Greek Miracle"', *Symbolae Osloenses*, 1968, 42: 83; Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 188.

41 The vase is depicted in Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, no. CE 34.

42 Fr. 3 and fr. 26 Calame = fr. 1 and fr. 3 Page. H. Diels already believed that he could detect hints of homo-erotic relationships among the girls in Alcman's maiden songs: 'Alkmans Partheneion', *Hermes*, 1896, 31: 339–74. Esp. C. Calame, *Les choeurs de jeunes filles en Grèce archaïque*, II, Rome, 1977, 86–95; B. Gentili, *Poetry and its Public in Ancient Greece*, Baltimore and London, 1988, 74–104 ('The Ways of Love in the Poetry of *Thiasos* and Symposium').

43 Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry*, 32.

44 M. L. West, 'Alcmanica', *Classical Quarterly*, 1965, ns 5, 199; M. Puelma, 'Die Selbstbeschreibung des Chores in Alkmans grossem Partheneion-Fragment', *Museum Helveticum*, 1977, 34: 40.

45 E. Bethe had already drawn the parallel, 'Die dorische Knabenliebe: ihre Ethik und ihre Idee', *Rheinisches Museum*, 1907, 62: 439–40, but it found widespread acceptance only after the Second World War. Most recently: B. Sergent, *L'Homosexualité initiatique dans l'Europe ancienne*, Paris, 1986, 14–24.

46 Buffière, *Eros adolescent*, 246–9; M. Vetta, 'Il P. Oxy. 2506 fr. 77 e la

poesia pederotica di Alceo', *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica*, 1982, NS 10, 7–20.

47 See Bremmer, this volume, ch. 1.

48 *Test.* 2, fr. 214 B1.

49 See Bremmer, this volume, ch. 1.